



Giving parents of children with special educational needs access to confidential and impartial information, advice and support

## Annual Report September 2009 - August 2010

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## **FOREWORD**

Welcome to this, the first annual report on Walsall Parent Partnership Service (PPS). This report gives a snapshot of the activities carried out by the PPS over the academic year 2009-10 and brings together a range of data that should be useful to:

- Parent Partnership Service staff and volunteers
- PPS Management Group
- Local authority (LA) officers responsible for the Parent Partnership Service (PPS)
- All those with an interest in the PPS at local level

The role of PPSs is to ensure parents have access to confidential and impartial information, advice and support so they can make informed decisions about their child's special educational needs (SEN). This is achieved by working in partnership with parents, providing information, services and training, working with relevant agencies and ensuring parents' views influence local policy and practice.

Walsall Parent Partnership Service has developed over a number of years into an established, well regarded service. We have for many years been privileged with stability in terms of staffing, however, this year has provided a number of challenges including:

- a. From May 09 – Feb 10 I took up an opportunity to work in the Wolverhampton PPS to cover the maternity leave of the service manager. This was the first time I'd stepped foot out of Walsall PPS since joining the service in 1999. It was a very good experience and I pay tribute to my staff here in Walsall for covering my absence and to the staff at Wolverhampton for all their support.
- b. From Oct 09, Kay Munday (Admin Officer) has been on secondment to another role within Children's Services and is doing really well. However, we have experienced a high turnover of five temporary staff members.

I consider my role as manager of Walsall Parent Partnership Service to be a blessing. It is full of rewards, frustrations and challenges but I am very proud to be associated with a service that really does make a difference to the lives of families in Walsall and pay thanks to my team for their hard work and commitment.

Ken Upton  
Service Coordinator



Meet the team from left to right  
Jill Simkin, Kay Munday, Ken Upton, Jean O'Neill

## **INTRODUCTION**

Parent Partnership Services (PPS) became statutory when the Special Educational Needs & Disability Act 2001 (SENDA) amended the Education Act 1996 (adding section 332A). The revised SEN Code of Practice (COP) that supports the legislation sets out minimum standards for PPS (par 2:21) as well as minimum standards for LAs (2:18).

PPSs provide practical support to parents, individually and in groups, to help them in their discussions with schools, the LA and other agencies. We provide parents with accurate neutral information on their rights, roles and responsibilities within the SEN process and on the range of options available to them. We inform parents about other agencies which can offer information and advice about their child's SEN which may be particularly important at the time the LA issues a proposed statement. We also, where appropriate, and in conjunction with their parents, seek to ascertain the views and wishes of children and ensure their views are taken into consideration.

It is important to note that whilst most parents supported by the PPS are not in disagreement with the LA, for those that are; evidence suggests that PPS have an essential role in the resolution of these disputes. The most recent national research which looked at the role of PPS was the ESRC research into the avoidance and resolution of disputes in respect of SEN. Carried out by Neville Harris and Emily Smith, School of Law, the University of Manchester in 2008 it included a survey of 150 LA's. One of its conclusions was that *'the work of PPS seems to be critical in resolving disputes; their role is often fairly similar to the work of independent SEN mediators but deals with much larger numbers of parents and therefore has more of an impact'*.

This level of support is never headline news and rarely, if ever, attracts any attention, but it is the bread and butter work of the PPS.

In December 2007 the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) published clear expectations of PPSs. The steering group for this work included representatives from the Association of Directors of Children's Services, National Strategies and Ofsted. The exemplification materials illustrate practice, from non-compliant to best practice, across a range of PPS work. The exemplifications have been useful to the PPS and the LA in making improvements in some areas of PPS work.

This report looks at our work across five key areas plus three areas that the LA is responsible for: - funding/budget, management and location. The report details the developments, successes and challenges which the service has experienced over the last academic year. In addition, this report indicates the levels we are at in each area.

## **FUNDING**

LAs are expected to:

- set out and delegate the budget for the PPS and ensure it is ring fenced;
- provide the support and resources to enable the PPS to provide an impartial and effective service and;
- ensure adequate resources and staffing to meet the needs of parents in their area.

The budget delegated to the PPS for 2009-10 was £174,777. The 2010-11 budget delegated is £171,050 with staffing costs at £101,741. Other costs include those associated to LA services e.g. postage and courier services, utilities and buildings maintenance and curator services leaving a balance of £14,000. The PPS is operating on essential spend.

In 2008, internal audit reported that there is more demand for the PPS than can be effectively supplied at the time with new cases increasing faster than those that are completed. This trend continues to be the case today (see charts on pg 6).

Previous requests for additional funding have been refused. The impact of this means that we are unable to meet the needs of parents in Walsall and the development of the PPS is hindered due to the lack of capacity. **Walsall is non-compliant in this area of work.**

## **MANAGEMENT**

LAs are expected to:

- take responsibility for setting and monitoring the overall standards of the service and ensure it is subject to best value principles
- ensure appropriate management structures for the service
- ensure adequate resources and staffing to meet the needs of the parents in their area
- ensure that the service has a development plan which sets out clear targets and is regularly reviewed; such plans should specify short, medium and long term strategies and arrangements for evaluation and quality assurance
- have, irrespective of whether it is outsourced or provided in-house, appropriate arrangements for overseeing, regularly monitoring and reviewing the service, taking account of best practice both locally and nationally.

PPSs are not independent; as statutory services they will always be the statutory responsibility of the LA, wherever they are based.

However, PPSs are expected to be at 'arms length' from their LA. Walsall PPS is funded by Walsall Council and is an 'in-house' service. It is run at 'arms-length' from the LA and Walsall Children's Services – Serco (WCS-S). There is sufficient distance between the LA, WCS-S and the PPS to avoid conflict of interests arising, to ensure parents can be confident that they are getting a quality service that is not compromised by being too closely controlled or too easily influenced by the LA and, in particular, by the SEN decision-makers. Staff employed by Walsall PPS inform parents of that which is statutorily required **and** that which is local policy and practice.

Oversight of the PPS is part of the responsibilities of the Prevention, Workforce and Partnerships Service which sits within the Universal Services strand of Children's Services.

The PPS has a multi agency Management Group that has published terms of reference, including responsibility for ensuring the impartiality of the PPS. The management group works with the PPS and the LA to support the policy, practice and development of the PPS. It has broad representation including a majority of parents and has parents appointed to the roles of Chair and Vice Chair. The group monitors the effectiveness and impartiality of the PPS and will next year aim to confirm reporting arrangements with the LA. **Walsall is good practice in this area of work.**



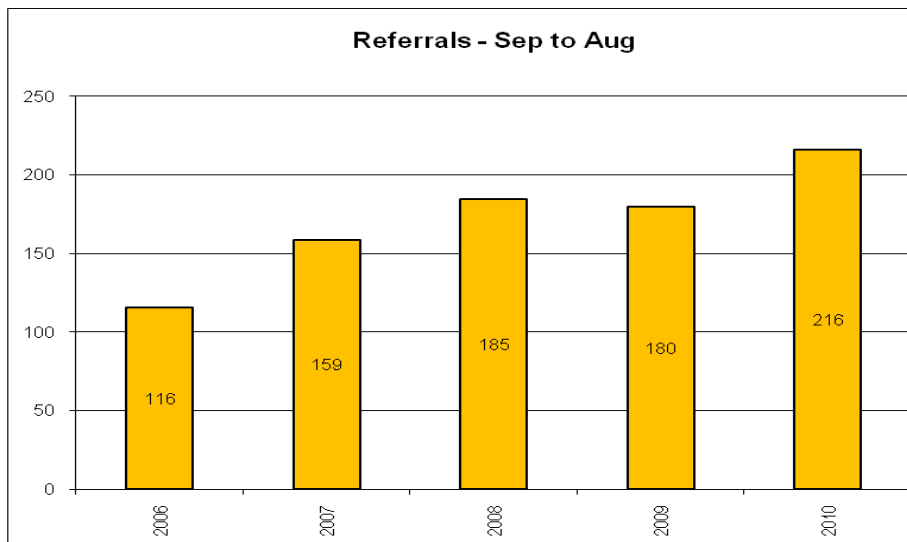
Parents of the PPS Management Group meet with Andy Stewart, Head of Preventative Services, Workforce Reform & Partnerships

## WORKING WITH PARENTS

LAs are expected to:

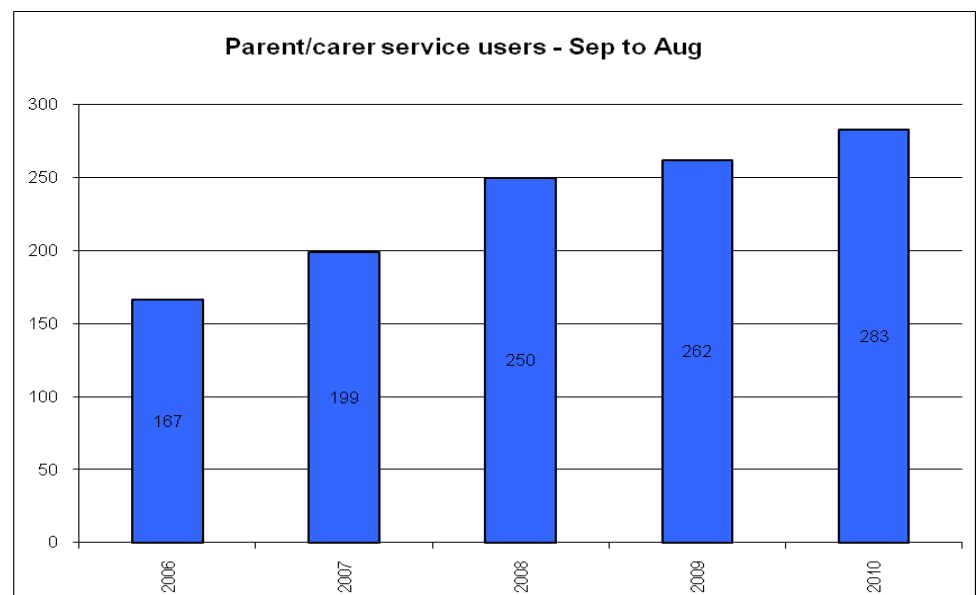
- ensure that the PPS is flexible and responsive to local changes.

Referrals to the PPS have risen this year to the highest level in the service's history. We have, at times, struggled to keep up with demand which, as mentioned earlier, has hindered the development of the PPS. Referrals are increasingly complex and take up the majority of officers' time. They necessitate staff drawing upon a range of competencies and methods using a high level of interpersonal skills; at times it requires abilities usually identified in areas such as counselling, negotiation, mediation, conflict management and advocacy.



This chart shows the number of referrals (or the number of families who received casework support from the PPS) received each academic year from 2005 – 2010.

The number of parent/carer service users is a measure of the level of casework.



Whilst the number of referrals to the service increases and the complexity of the cases that PPS staff work with become more complex, staffing over the last 5 years has remained static with:

- 1 x full time employed (fte) manager,
- 1 x fte parent partnership officer (PPO)
- 1 x part time employed PPO, and
- 1 x fte admin officer\*

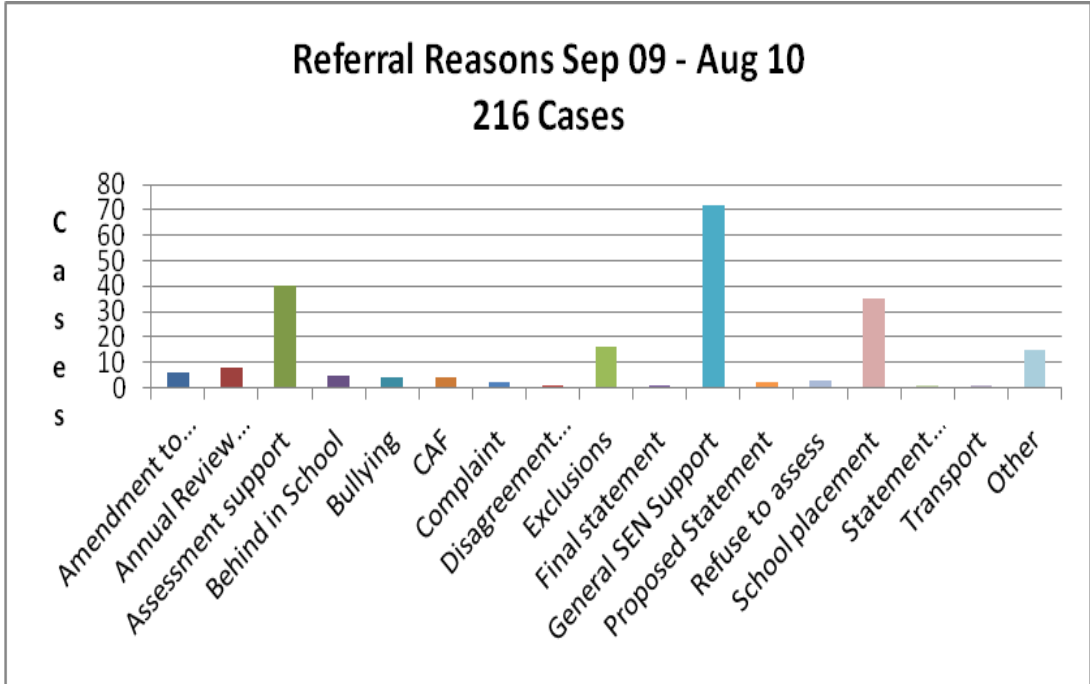
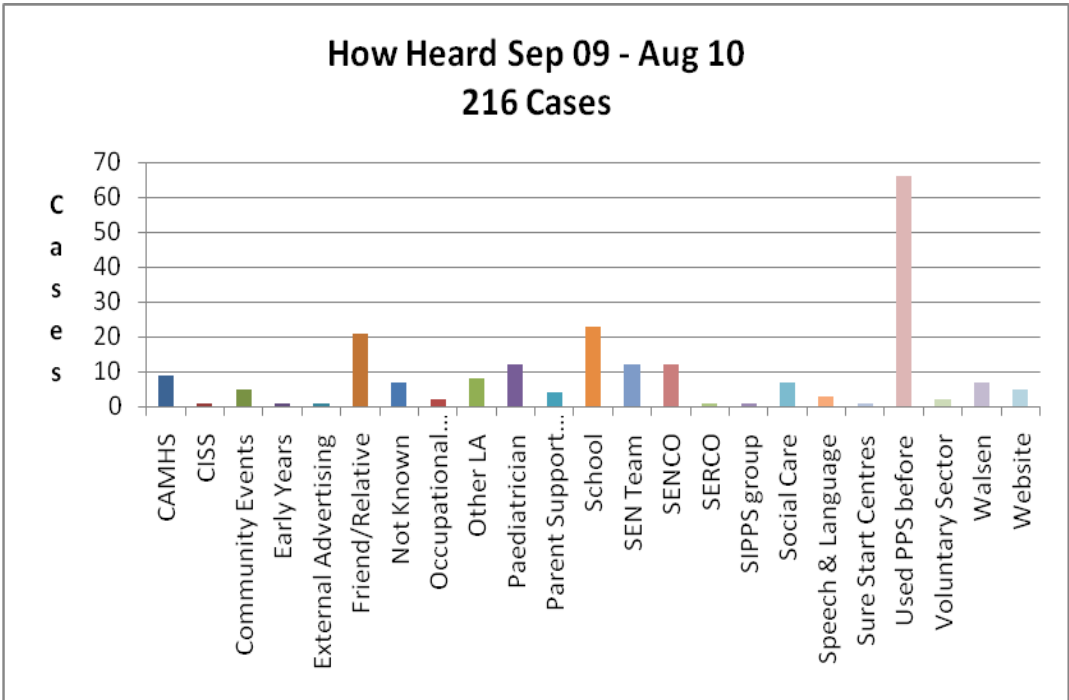
\*As a result of Kay (Admin Officer) going on secondment; the service has had no less than 5 temporary admin officers over the 10 month period. This has created additional pressures on the PPS.

Month	Two Working Days	More than two Working Days	Total Calls	Response Rate
September	187	3	190	98.4%
October	144	10	154	93.5%
November	169	24	193	87.6%
December	108	5	113	95.6%
January	234	15	249	94.0%
February	179	9	188	95.2%
March	229	22	251	91.2%
April	157	19	176	89.2%
May	152	16	168	90.5%
June	191	14	205	93.2%
July	240	19	259	92.7%
August	110	1	111	99.1%
<b>TOTAL/Overall</b>	<b>2100</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>2257</b>	<b>93.0%</b>

Our local key performance indicator is to return calls within 2 working days 95% of the time. We have achieved this target in only 4 months.

This chart shows how parents heard about the PPS.

Whilst the vast majority of parents have used the PPS before, most other parents are recommended to contact us by schools and friends or relatives.



This shows the reasons why parents contact us.

General SEN Support is used too often; we've already taken steps to ensure we identify a more specific reason where appropriate.

Direct work with parents, more often than not, generates casework. Unlike enquiries, which can be 'one off' phone calls, casework support involves 'considerable' input e.g. telephone support, home visits, liaison with a range of different agencies, support in dispute resolution to name but a few. The case study below (anonymized to protect the family involved) provides an example of the level of complex cases that parent partnership service staff engage with on a daily basis.

Mrs Akhtar contacted us re her son Mohammed Sarwar Abdul Rahman. He was 7 years old and has autism. His school was struggling to meet his needs so she wanted him moved to a special school. We discussed her concerns during a home visit. She knew that a statement of special educational needs is needed for a special school placement but didn't know if a statutory assessment had been requested. I phoned the SEN team at Walsall Childrens Services -Serco who told me that a statutory assessment was almost complete and that they were waiting for a report from Social Services.

With Mrs Akhtar's consent I telephoned the Children with Disabilities team as a Social Worker had carried out an assessment of the family's needs earlier that week. This team had a different name for Mohammed to the name I had been given. Mrs Akhtar said that the longer version of his name is on his birth certificate but social services have a shorter version, which is the name the family use. I explained this and the duty officer was able to locate his records and agreed to send a report to the SEN team for the statutory assessment.

It was now July and Mohammed was due to transfer to junior school in September. Parents did not want him to move school for a short amount of time and then move again if a special school place was agreed. I rang the SEN team and explained the urgency to the Assessment and Monitoring Officer (AMO) who agreed to make appointments at special schools immediately, even before the statement was written.

I helped parents to prepare a list of questions and accompanied them and Mohammed on a visit to a special school for children with severe learning difficulties (SLD). Parents felt this school wasn't appropriate as the pupils there have more severe difficulties than Mohammed. I asked the head teacher about the P levels that Mohammed's peers were working at and their levels of communication skills compared with his.

I spoke to the AMO about parents views and asked him to arrange visits to the two special schools for children with mild learning difficulties (MLD). He said that reports showed that SLD school was more appropriate, but agreed to arrange the visits.

I accompanied parents and Mohammed on visits to two MLD schools. Parents liked one of these as they felt Mohammed was working on a par with his peers at this school. One of the staff in the class he would be in spoke Mirpuri, (Mohammed's first language). I asked the headteacher about the other pupils' levels of functioning.

I spoke to the AMO about parents' choice of school and their reasons. Two days later I received confirmation that Mohammed could have a place at this school, which would be named in his statement.

I feel that without my involvement parents would not have had sufficient knowledge of the SEN framework or the confidence to express their views. I feel that Mohammed's admission to an appropriate school would have been delayed and he may not have got a place at parent's choice of school.

Jill Simkin  
Parent Partnership Officer



With the support of the National Parent Partnership Network (NPPN) we have revised our confidentiality policy which has been endorsed by our management group. The policy is rigorously upheld and understood by the LA and PPS and will be reviewed by the management group annually. Parents are informed about the confidentiality policy at the first point of contact and are offered the choice of being given a hard copy or signposted to our web pages where they can access it online. The policy is distributed widely and explained on request to schools and agencies to ensure it is understood and respected.

Currently, Walsall PPS doesn't have any Independent Parental Supporters (IPSs). At the request of the LA, in the academic year 2008/09 we recruited and trained five volunteers interested in enhancing the PPS by becoming an IPS. However, the additional work required to take this forward has not been possible due to a lack of capacity. Instead, the PPS signposts those parents who request independent support to third sector organisations e.g. IPSEA, ACE, Network 81 and SOS!SEN.

The PPS is now able to support parents before, during and after a tribunal after the PPS Management Group influenced the LAs decision. **Walsall is minimum practice in this area of work.**

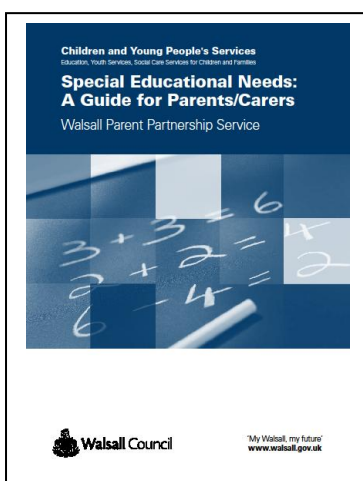
## INFORMATION AND PUBLICITY

LAs are expected to:

- ensure parents and schools are provided with clear information about the PPS, and
- ensure the PPS is provided with accurate information on all SEN processes as set out in the Education Act 1996, relevant regulations, and the SEN Code of Practice and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

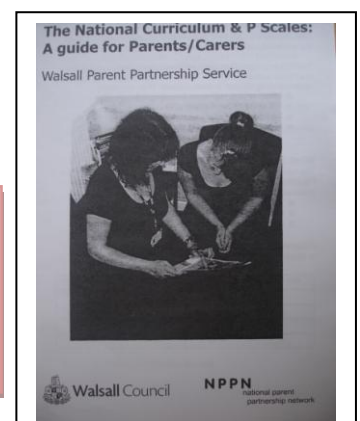
In 2007, we produced a parent information pack which provided parents with accurate and up-to-date information on issues relating to SEN. These leaflets were written in consultation with a group of parents and WCS-S. Rather than sharing costs and using the same leaflets, WCS-S proceeded to duplicate the same information under their own corporate brand. To avoid parents becoming confused by the two sets of information we have not re-produced our leaflets; they remain however available on our website enabling parents to digest the content at their own pace.

This year we have produced:



Service leaflet setting out our role and contact details.

This guide to the national curriculum and P Scales was developed from a need by parents. They are often referred to in meetings with no explanations.





New service poster to reflect our new location.



Three 'WALSSEN' newsletters. Circulation is in the region of 1500. WALSSEN was distributed widely to parents, schools, children's and family centre's, LA services, health teams, libraries, GPs and the voluntary sector. WALSSEN was also sent to local MPs and councilors\*.

*\*Due to the current economic climate, WALSSEN will no longer be published in hard copy and will only be available via email and online.*

Opportunities to promote the work of the PPS often materialise; presentations given this year include:

- SENCOs (Special Educational Needs Coordinators)
- Parent groups
- Parents and school staff at parents' evenings



With the support of the NPPN we have this year published our brand new impartiality policy which has been endorsed by our management group. The policy will be reviewed by the management group annually. New publications written by the PPS are done so in accordance with the policy and includes arrangements for the management group to monitor our publicity for impartiality. Parents are informed about the impartiality policy at the first point of contact and are offered the choice of a hard copy or signposted to our web pages. The policy is distributed widely and explained on request to schools and agencies to ensure it is understood and respected.

The PPS has its own service identity after the management group influenced the LAs decision earlier this year. The identity includes logo, colour, style and strap line; all of which is given sole prominence on our information and publications. The logo was designed by children at Castle Business & Enterprise College (a special school for children with mild learning difficulties). We have autonomy over the wording of publications.

We have our own direct line to avoid parents going through the LAs switchboard or non PPS staff. However, at busy periods, we resulted to diverting our direct line to Kay (Admin Officer) who is on secondment to another team in an attempt to provide parents with human contact as opposed to voicemail.

We have basic information on the PPS pages of the LAs website. After the LA authorised us to develop our own identity, plans were made to extend it to include our own website, PowerPoint slides and other promotional materials. However, the PPS is operating on essential spend so these developments have not materialised. **Walsall is good practice in this area of work.**

## **TRAINING, ADVICE & SUPPORT**

LAs are expected to:

- Ensure, where the service is provided in-house, that the staff receive appropriate initial and ongoing training and development to enable them to carry out their role effectively.

The current economic climate prevents staff from accessing fee paying training and conferences; however staff are able to access in-house training; below are some of the training staff have participated in this year:

- Information, Advice & Guidance (NVQ)
- In-house safeguarding
- Web author
- Common Assessment Framework
- SEN & Disability Tribunal

In addition to individual casework support, we provide advice on SEN procedures to parents through information, support and training. This year we have supported/facilitated/delivered:

- **SIPPS:** multi agency training course for parents of children with a new diagnosis of autism.
- **Rising to the Challenge:** six week course delivered in partnership with Autism West Midlands.
- **Parent Information Events (PIEs):** monthly information sessions for parents covering topics such as exclusions, speech & language, positive behavior management, self esteem, sleep strategies and more
- **Coffee Mornings:** held in different locations across Walsall.



We are expected to recruit sufficient IPSs to meet the needs of parents in Walsall, however as mentioned earlier it has not been possible to carry forward the additional work in this area due to a lack of capacity.

It is expected that PPSs will provide training to schools and other agencies however, this is provided on an adhoc basis due to a lack of capacity. We have provided training to two groups this year: - newly appointed SENCOs and SEN Governors.

Most training and information materials are produced in-house.

PPS staff, with the exception of our Admin Officer, are trained in current and relevant SEN law and use this knowledge to support and train parents. Through the NPPN, the DCSF is making arrangements for staff to be provided with training in relation to SEN & disability law. It is vital for the PPS and the parents that access it that staff employed to work in the PPS undergo this training and are given appropriate study time.

Further training needs are identified in team meetings and supervision which informs the service plan. Staff receive basic training on an adhoc basis. **Walsall is minimum practice in this area of work.**

## **NETWORKING & COLLABORATION**

LAs are expected to:

- Develop co-operative arrangements with the third sector to ensure the mutual exchange of information and expertise
- Promote and facilitate arrangements for the PPS to work in partnership with other agencies, using local plans.

This area of work is a particular strength of ours; driven by the high quality casework support. PPS staff work in partnership with parents and other agencies by liaising with a range of professionals and the third sector in order to facilitate effective communication and develop positive working relationships.

We have links with many third sector organisations e.g. Walsall Carers, Mencap, Walsall Voluntary Action, Contact a Family, ACE, IPSEA, Afasic, Autism West Midlands, Downs Syndrome Association and others. We have helped establish parent support groups: ASC and PARENTS and provide support to others e.g. POWER, AWARE, PROUD and Walsall Dyspraxia Support Group to name a few.



We are considered by many to be an effective impartial service and our brand new impartiality policy, which has been widely distributed, will certainly add credence. We are represented on the Autism Working Group, SEN Steering Group, Transition Steering Group and Team Around the Child Steering Group. We're also represented on the SENCO Forum's at which we share good practice and help keep SENCOs up-to-date with local and national policy and practice.

We are part of a regional and national structure and meet regularly with colleagues from the West Midlands to share good practice, develop regional initiatives and produce regional responses to inquiries and such like. We are represented on Napps (National Association of Parent Partnership Staff) and have contributed to various projects throughout the Lamb Inquiry.

In addition, we have played a fundamental part in establishing Family Voice Walsall (FVW), a parent led group working with Walsall Children's Services to improve the lives of families of children with disabilities. FVW was successful with two grant applications from the Aiming High for Disabled Children (AHDC) programme.

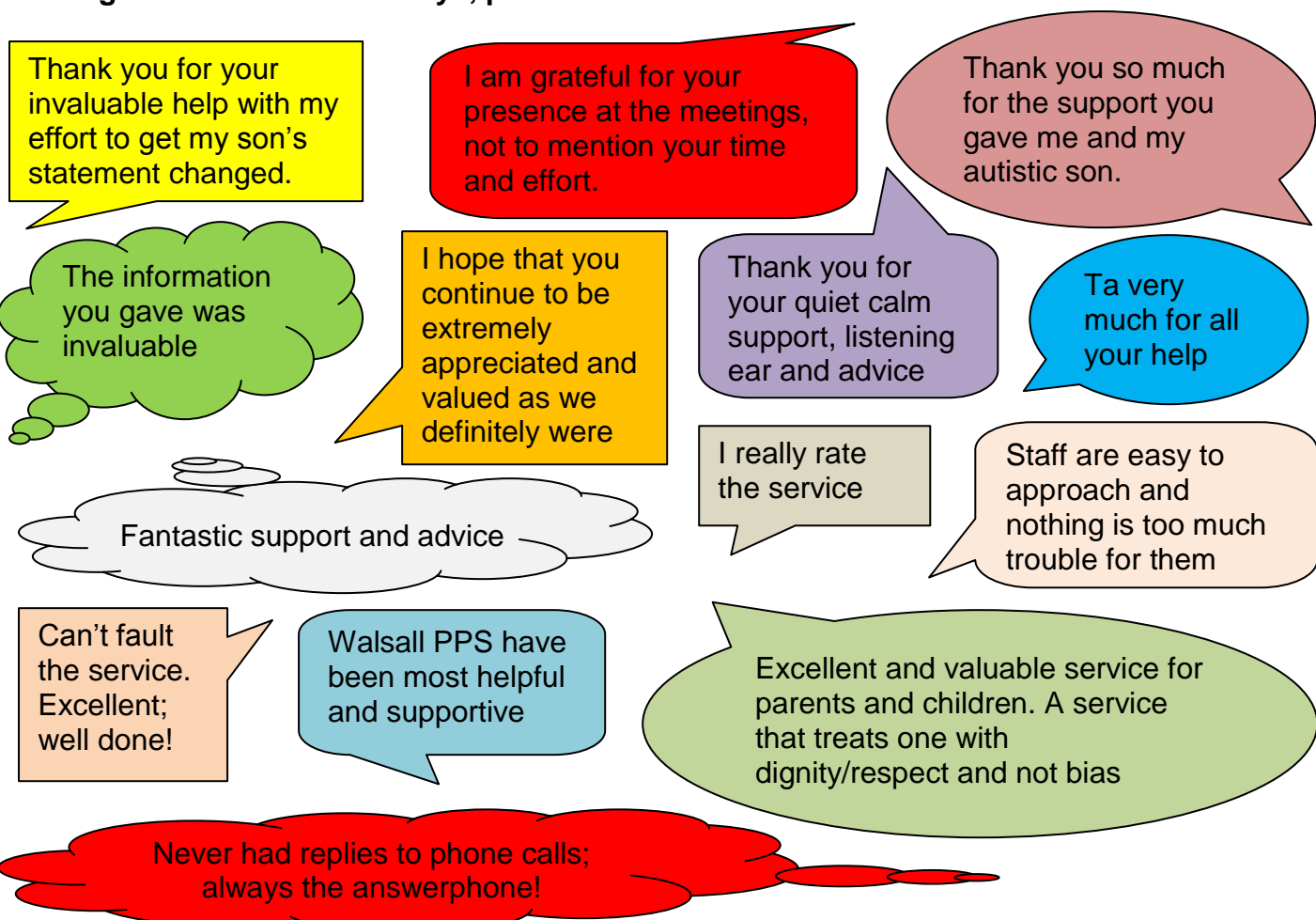
There is no written agreement with the LA to sustain policy and practice in relation to networking and collaboration. We are involved with networking with some local agencies on an adhoc basis. **Walsall is minimum practice in this area of work.**

## INFORMING & SHAPING LOCAL POLICY & PRACTICE

LAs are expected to:

- Actively seek feedback from the PPS and its service users to inform and influence decisions on SEN policies, procedures and practices in order to improve communications and minimise the potential for misunderstandings and disagreements.

We are passionate about seeking the views of parents who use the PPS. **Through cards, letters and regular satisfaction surveys, parents have said:**



Can I just add to the email below that I was at all stages supported by the Walsall Parent Partnership and who still do offer support.

Walsall Parent Partnership are involved in all areas; they are very proactive in getting parents to network to ensure effective all round support.

They may not always be on the end of a phone, but they always get back to you and will be with you at times over and above the times stipulated in contracts of employments.

Thanks again for your time.

This is an extract from an email sent to us by a parent who provided feedback to the Lamb Inquiry.

**When asked what improvements should be made to the PPS; parents have said:**

Extra staffing

More staff

Just be available

You need a receptionist to avoid us having to talk to the answerphone

More staff available when they have heavy workload

Make more parents aware you exist

Advertise the service

I heard about PPS from my sister and then the local authority. Maybe, the PPS should have a flyer up in every school to make more parents aware you exist.

The vast majority of parents who use the PPS express themselves as satisfied and very appreciative of the service they receive, however they express significant concern that they have sometimes found it difficult to find the PPS in the first place. Other comments are in the same vein about the service needing more staff and more publicity.

**Parents tell us we should remain at arms length from the makers because:**

You explain things without bias

It's better that way

To ensure advice is not conflicting

Parents can talk openly without feeling judged

I feel more confident knowing you'll provide fair advice

Unbiased

The advice given is unbiased and not in support of any 'agency'

Impartial

I feel more confident seeking advice from independent PPS

You provide fairer advice and support

It ensures advice is not conflicting

It's better being independent so decision makers can't order you to say what they want

You ensure the child becomes paramount

Parents feel free to express positive and negative views without feeling judged

You treat parents as individuals, not as numbers like other organisations do

You are neutral and understanding

You make us feel confident because you provide a quality service

You're not influenced by them and therefore able to give us unbiased information

When asked what might have happened to their family had they not have contacted the PPS; parents have said:

My child may have gone to social services

My child wouldn't be attending school

Would have caused family stress and loss of confidence in education system

My son's education would have suffered

I wouldn't have the got the results I wanted; the headteacher listened more to the PPS staff than me

I would be lost and confused

I would have missed important points in the assessment and statementing process

I'd be in a worse rut

Wouldn't have known what options to take

I would not have got a proper diagnosis

We have facilitated three consultations for the Department for Education; Lamb Inquiry, Information Project and independent research into PPSs.



Parents influencing national policy through the Information Project; part of the Lamb Inquiry.



We use our parent training group to inform our training programme. This group is chaired by a parent and meets regularly.

We utilise a purpose built database which enables us to produce detailed statistical information on the PPS, which has been particularly useful in the compilation of benchmarking statistics and management reports. It's also beneficial to parents as it means they can talk to any member of the PPS without having to repeat information.

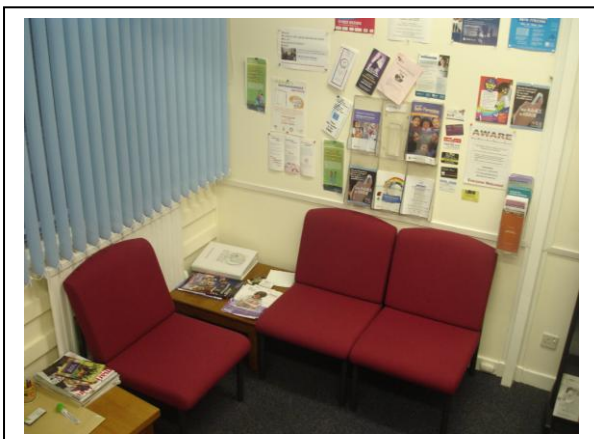
We contribute to the annual benchmarking of PPSs undertaken by the NPPN.

We have this year played a fundamental part in the development of Family Voice Walsall; a parent led group working with Walsall Children's Services to improve services for families of children with disabilities. Using funds from the Aiming High for Disabled Children programme (AHDC) we have worked in partnership with local parents, support groups and the third sector to deliver the parent participation strand of AHDC here in Walsall.

PPSs have always been expected to play a part in informing and influencing policy and practice however, this can be a difficult area of work because it requires the LA to listen and respond to the comments of the PPS based on the views expressed by parents. Neither the parents that access the PPS nor the staff are routinely consulted about policy. As mentioned above, the PPS is represented on some local strategic groups but this is on an adhoc basis. Our relationship with the SEN Team is close enough to enable misunderstandings and disagreements to be resolved without compromising our impartiality. **Walsall is minimum practice in this area of work.**

## **LOCATION**

The PPS has its own office space away from the SEN decision-makers; not overheard and with access to a private meeting room to meet with parents. There is some collaborative working with the Children's Information Service and Choice Adviser. However, the building does not have suitable public/disabled access demonstrated creating a risk to the LA as it is not meeting its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act. **Walsall PPS is minimum practice in this area of work.**





## **WHAT'S NEXT FOR WALSALL PPS?**

- Our team plan which sets out what we intend to do during the year will be reviewed and evaluated and will contribute to the 2010 – 2011 plan.
- Staff will undertake new SEN & disability law training.
- We will review the membership of the management group to include representation from the third sector.
- Arrangements for reporting to the LA will be need to be finalised this year.
- A more robust approach to the implementation of the exemplification materials is required to ensure we are at 'good practice'.

## **CHALLENGES**

- A good PPS, that is one with the resources to meet the needs of the local population, the ability and opportunity to work strategically with the LA and the evident impartiality parents want, exists where the LA is committed to the provision and development of such a service.
- The Lamb Inquiry was set up in 2008 to look at how parental confidence in the SEN system could be improved. Lamb promised a radical overhaul of the system which has implications for PPSs, not least parents having a new right to appeal to tribunal if the LA refuses to amend their child's statement at an annual review.
- Other implications from Lamb include the availability of training for staff in SEN & disability law, a re-launch of PPSs and a review to ensure PPSs are appropriately deployed.
- We will continue to reach as many parents as possible but this may become difficult if demand outweighs available resources.
- We will endeavour to address the outstanding issues preventing us from using Independent Parental Supporters.
- Our Parent Information Events have been a particular challenge. Several have taken place but 'buy-in' from partner organisations has not been easy due to their other commitments and staffing shortages.
- We will endeavour to sustain our commitment to Family Voice Walsall but again, this will have to be balanced out with casework demands.
- The promotion of the PPS is always a challenge not least because we are reliant on others to help publicise our work.